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Education can't be the first victim of Covid curbs

What's the point of closing schools while keeping all other public spaces open?

AMID a rapid surge in Covid-19 infections across the country, the government has decided to close down schools and colleges till February 6, 2022 while directing the university authorities to take their own decisions about closures, which a number of them already did. According to the health minister, the decision was taken considering the spike in Covid-19 infections in schools and upon the directives of the prime minister. While we understand the concerns about the safety of students, we wonder whether this was based on a scientific reading of the situation and how it will bring any positive result while all the offices, factories, shopping malls and other public spaces remain open during this time.

Although the government has given a five-point directive to prevent the spread of the virus—including prohibition on gathering of over 100 people in any political, social or religious programmes; producing Covid-19 vaccine certificates to participate in any programmes, attend government and public offices, and to commute by public transports; wearing masks and maintaining health rules at public places, etc.—enforcing them will be a big challenge, if past experience is any indication.

Against this backdrop, we wonder how the restrictions put on educational institutions will help curb the infection rates. Having remained shut for about 18 months from March 2020 till August 2021, educational institutions started in-person classes only last September. While a 15-day closure for schools should not be a big problem, if the closure extends beyond that, its effects on the school and college students, particularly those in the rural areas, will be immense. One may recall that during the past two years, the school drop-out rate and child labour increased, and more female students became victims of child marriage. Many of them could not continue their education due to the digital divide. Therefore, any restrictions put on educational institutions must be well-thought-out.

What the government can do instead is bring all the students of schools, colleges and universities under its vaccination coverage. Since we reportedly have a good stock of vaccines, the government should expedite its campaigns to inoculate all students as soon as possible, with an aim to keep the educational institutions open at all costs. Another way to curb the infections could be to put restrictions on the areas that are severely infected. As far as we know, the authorities have already developed a zoning system—under which areas are divided into red, yellow and green zones, based on the number of infections. If this system can be implemented properly, with the help of local administrations and law enforcement agencies, experts believe we will be able to curb the spread of the virus.

We hope the government will consider these suggestions before putting further restrictions on the educational institutions.

A death march on the roads

Rising road casualty numbers show utter failure of authorities

IT is quite unfortunate that road crashes continue to take lives without any respite, mocking the laws of the land as underage or ill-trained drivers go on joy rides with heavy vehicles before the “watchful” eyes of the transport bosses. Tragic events like that of entire families getting wiped out in a single incident are occurring far too frequently. In such cases, the surviving minors are the worst victims, with little to no support from the state. The tragic tale of Bristy Akhter, who lost both her parents in a road accident on Friday, shows how lawlessness is ruling the roost on our roads. Reportedly, on the same day, as many as 16 people lost their lives in road crashes all over the country.

A great deal has been said about improving the situation on the roads; for example, budgetary allocations have been increased, new roads have been built and some old ones repaired and widened. A road safety law has also been passed. But, in reality, there is no reflection of the reassurance given by the relevant authorities about improving road safety. According to the latest estimate by police, based on GDs and cases filed, the number of deaths from road accidents in 2021 saw nearly a 30 percent jump from the previous year, with about 5,088 individuals reported dead. The actual number, as per independent estimates, would be higher.

This is despite the fact that many vehicles were off roads because of the pandemic. It is worth noting that nearly 60 percent of the road crashes take place on the national and regional highways. Buses and trucks are mostly responsible for crushing smaller vehicles like private cars, microbus, three-wheelers, motorcycles, rickshaws, easybikes, etc. It seems, however, futile to talk about the many systematic failures leading to this scenario. Just consider, although a number of bodies exist to ensure this doesn't happen, they are not empowered enough to do their job and lack effective coordination to get desired results. There is no dearth of plans either—what's missing is strong will and judicious, coordinated execution.

We urge the transport authorities to take a long, hard look at their failure to deliver promised results on our roads. It is clearly not enough to have a road safety law. What's essential is that they implement the law to the letter, without any concession given to the powerful transport owners and associations who are mostly responsible for the consistently deteriorating road safety situation. The government must deliver.

Why economic forecasting is now trickier than before



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

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ABDULLAH SHIBLI

BANGLADESH has some very difficult—and one could say unpredictable—times ahead in the coming years. I do not want to raise the red flag or be too alarmist, but who knows what the future holds for a country trying to forge through uncertain times and tackle the many dangers that are coming its way: bad weather, non-cooperative foreign governments, competitive foreign markets, unfavourable trade regimes, cyberattacks, etc.

Bangladesh must cross several milestones along the way as it marches forward. To name a few, the country aims to graduate from the LDC status in 2026, become an upper-middle-income country (UMIC) by 2031 and achieve high-income country status by 2041. In addition, there are still development targets to be achieved by 2030 under the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

As an economist, you frequently encounter questions about the future. These questions are on my mind, too. For example, “When will Bangladesh reach the middle-income country status?” “What will be its GDP growth rate next year?” “Can our RMG exports reach the USD 50 billion target soon?”

These are legitimate questions and often I find myself scratching my head to find the answers. Forecasting future economic growth is the job of an economist and we are trained to do so. We also are aware of the many pitfalls that one faces when we try to look into the future. The biggest obstacles on the path to accuracy are: 1) Uncertainty, 2) Lack of data, and 3) Limitations of the tools or models.

Uncertainty has been a big factor in upending the economists' forecasts. GDP growth rates in almost all countries slowed down in the last quarter of 2021, and all forecasts have been proven wrong. Even the USA and China are expected to experience slower growth in 2022. US GDP growth will decline from 5 percent last year to 4 percent this year, and China's from 8 percent to half that number. Since China's economy has been the main locomotive of global growth in the last few years, “broader economic outlook is beginning to dim,” according to *The New York Times*. But don't be surprised if we see another revision in mid-2022.

Forecasting the future of GDP, the price level, unemployment or other less known economic variables is usually based on econometric models. However, there are different categories and brands of models, and they vary in terms of complexity and focus. It is well-recognised that models

can never be expected to forecast with 100 percent accuracy.

The conflicting economic forecasts in the present uncertain times are obviously raising some concerns. On January 4, 2022, *The Wall Street Journal* raised the alarm with a headline-making announcement: “Forget about trying to forecast 2022”, and warned that economic

scenarios rely on the speed of Omicron transmission. Some are optimistic that because it is hitting a lot of the world all at once, the nature of its effect on global supply chains might be different from the experience with previous variants, whose effects weren't so synchronised. But these are possibilities rather than certainties.

What about the future? The



ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLOB CHAKROBORTY

predictions this year could be trickier than usual. A peer-reviewed journal article shows that economic forecasts made more errors during uncertain times.

Central banks have typically been very secretive about their decision-making process, particularly with regards to the assumptions they make in formulating their policy decisions. The US Fed, which is more forthcoming in this regard, reported in December that its governing body “did not yet see the new variant as fundamentally altering the path of economic recovery”. In other words, the US Fed did not anticipate the economic downswing that came in late December and January.

Let us consider the latest data from the world's largest economy, the USA. In mid-January, the US Department of Commerce reported that retail sales fell by 1.9 percent from November to December. And this decline was across the board. Department store sales dipped by 7 percent, electronics and appliances fell by 2.9 percent and non-store retailers, of which Amazon.com was the largest, took an 8.7 percent hit.

Several factors are at play here. Supply-chain problems, semiconductor shortages, and Omicron hazards are all still sources of concern. So are shortages of skilled workers and the decline in the service industries. Recent forecasts from major banks and research organisations are somewhat at odds with each other.

The International Monetary Fund will release its World Economic Outlook on January 25, a week later than planned, to factor in the latest Covid-19 developments. MD Georgieva last month told the Reuters Next conference that the IMF was likely to further downgrade its global economic growth projections in January to reflect the emergence of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus. In October, the IMF had forecast global economic growth of 5.9 percent in 2021 and 4.9 percent this year, while underscoring the uncertainty posed by the new coronavirus variants.

The biggest source of uncertainty is obviously the course that the pandemic will take. There is a strong feeling among some public health officials that the worst is over, and the role of the virus will be endemic, similar to influenza. We also learned that the coronavirus mutates in countries with unvaccinated masses—we still have multitudes of them in various countries, both developed and developing. “Unfortunately,” says immunologist Ali Ellebedy at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, Missouri, “we're still living in uncertainty.”

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Your Netaji Versus My Netaji



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PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

A political battle to appropriate the legacy of India's freedom struggle icon Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose is going on between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. Netaji, of course, is not the only nationalist personality over which the Indian political parties have bickered with each other to prove who is the “true inheritor” of their legacies. Over the years, BJP and Congress have also indulged in one-upmanship over the legacies of Mahatma Gandhi and Vallabhbhai Patel.

In the latest battle, the Modi government first announced its decision to extend the country's Republic Day celebrations from January 23, birthday of Netaji, instead of the traditional January 24. Last year, the government had declared Netaji's birthday as “Parakram Diwas”. This was followed by Modi's announcement on January 21 that a grand granite statue of Netaji would be installed near the India Gate, and that until the statue is completed, there would be a hologram of the freedom fighter. Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress wasted no time in welcoming the decision, but wondered if it was aimed at redressing grievances over the rejection of Bengal's tableau or out of respect for Netaji.

Earlier, on January 16, Mamata shot

off a letter to Modi expressing “profound shock” at the government's decision to keep the state's proposed tableau out of this year's Republic Day parade to be held in New Delhi on January 26. The proposed tableau, Mamata said, was set to commemorate the contributions of Netaji and his INA in his 125th birth anniversary year and would have “carried portraits of some of the most illustrious sons and daughters of this country”. She also wrote that “all the people of West Bengal are deeply pained by this attitude of the central government. Bengal was at the forefront of the Indian freedom struggle and has paid the heaviest price for the country's Independence through the partition.”

Clearly, Mamata was falling back on her pet political plank of Bengali sub-nationalism to pin down Modi's party. This is the plank she had used successfully to pain Modi and the home minister as “bohiragata” (outsiders) in the run-up to last year's assembly elections in Bengal, where Trinamool Congress returned to power with a landslide win.

However, about the proposed tableau, a defence ministry official said the entire selection process follows a set of guidelines and a committee comprising experts from different fields takes the final decision. He rejected the charge of bias against West Bengal. It may be recalled that in 2016, West Bengal's tableau on Baul singers was adjudged the best among the tableaux put up for the Republic Day march-past. The official also pointed out that West Bengal's tableau was selected for the parade in 2026, 2017, 2019 and 2021. Apparently, due to the sensitivities of West Bengal as well as Tamil Nadu, whose tableau on a different subject also could not make the cut, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh in an unusual

move wrote separate letters to Mamata and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin, explaining why the two tableaux were not chosen for this year's parade.

Seeking to make political capital out of the rejection, the Mamata government is now reportedly planning to use it in the state-level event to be held in Kolkata. Political analysts say this would only amplify the rivalry between Modi and Mamata to appropriate the legacy of Netaji.

It may be recalled that in one of the major events of 2021, Modi had set in motion the commemoration of the 125th birth anniversary year of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose in Kolkata on January 23, and presided over the inaugural function of the “Parakram Diwas” celebrations at Victoria Memorial in Kolkata.

Besides, to mark Netaji's return to India nearly three years after he had escaped from his house in Kolkata, the defence ministry dedicated “Sankalp Smarak” (memorial) to the nation in Andaman and Nicobar Islands on December 29. It was on December 29, 1943 that Netaji, accompanied by some of his INA colleagues, flew to Port Blair in Andaman and Nicobar by a Japanese aircraft and, the next day, he hoisted the national flag for the first time on Indian soil. Netaji had escaped from British surveillance in Kolkata on January 21, 1941.

The questions now are: how healthy a precedent would this race for the appropriation of legacies of India's freedom struggle stalwarts set for the present generation and the posterity? Should Indians not be uniting in imbibing the lessons from the life and work of those stalwarts? This, of course, doesn't preclude a critical appraisal of these leaders.

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